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ABSTRACT

This paper describes and analyzes an incident which occurred during observation and videotaping of an eighth-grade language arts class. This classroom observation was part of an ongoing case study of an eighth-grade teacher of Native American heritage. The vignette that is presented describes a fist fight that occurred between two male students in the classroom. The focus of the discussion is less on the altercation than on the reactions of the teacher and the students not only to the fight but also to the atmosphere of the classroom after the scuffle. The vignette describes how the teacher responded to the needs of her students and restored classroom order in a way that reflected her American Indian cultural background and heritage. (IAH)

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"The Fight"
A Vignette from the Case of Alice Dale

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"The Fight"
A Vignette from the Case of Alice Dale

INTRODUCTION

> "To this day one of the similarities among various Indian peoples is a quiet soft-spoken manner of dealing with others which results from a world view that all belong to one another and should be treated accordingly." (Bendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1990, p. 37)

On April 23, 1991, at 9:30 a.m., two researchers from Wichita State University, Tonya Huber and Scott Hieger, arrived at Highwater Middle School to observe Alice Dale's eighth-grade language arts class. As the vignette included below describes, a fist fight between two male students occurred in the classroom. The video camera was in place and was recording at the time of the altercation, and it was possible to record a good portion of the fight and the aftermath. The researchers would like to direct the reader's attention away from the fight and to the reactions of the teacher and the students to not only the fight but also to the atmosphere of the classroom after the scuffle.

Alice Dale's actions during the events of that day provide evidence that she operates from the worldview of her Native American heritage to maintain control in her classroom. By remaining calm and reserved, she maintained a climate in the classroom that was picked up on by the entire class. This climate of calm allowed the students to quickly return to the completion of the tasks assigned. During emergencies and times of crisis, a person often does not have time to consciously think of a course of action and so relies upon implicit mores and behaviors. The etic perspective of the research team is that Alice Dale drew on her Native American upbringing and heritage and used it successfully to soothe her students and restore order in the classroom. The vignette examined below describes how Alice Dale responded to the needs of her students by using her cultural background and heritage. This specific vignette epitomizes culturally responsible pedagogy drawing from cultural and craft wisdom (Smith, 1991).

The author would like to note that the vignette is written in a "new journalistic" or active style of composition. This is due to the fact that in this instance, the observers were not idle bystanders, but were in fact actively involved with the events occurring in the classroom. "New journalism" strives to give the reader a fuller sense of the action taking place. Use of this style facilitates a more complete record of the altercation and its affect on the class.

"The Fight"
A Vignette from the Case of Alice Dale

"You want me to set the equipment up here in the hall?"

"That would be a good idea. We don't have much time between the bells."

"Okay. . .Did you bring in the power cords?"

"No, you had them in your hand earlier."

"Where did I put them now?"

"Scott, you're talking too loud; they're still in the middle of taking those standardized tests. You know how your voice carries."

"Sorry 'bout that, how long have they been taking the tests. . .are they the Iowa Basic tests?"

"I think about an hour and a half."

The 9:30 A.M. bell rang and a flood of students from Highwater Middle School poured out of the classrooms into the freedom of the halls.

"Okay Scott, let's get in there and set it up. . .go off towards the back there. . . yea, this is fine. . .let's see if we can move some of these desks and get a clearer view of the class."

As I set up the video equipment in the back of the class room, Dr. Huber went to ask the instructor, Alice Dale, if she could slightly rearrange the back of the room. Upon receiving a *"go right ahead"* from Mrs. Dale, we moved the desks away from my immediate area.

"Did you know she's a quarter Chickasaw?"

"Really?" I replied, "I didn't know there were any Native American teachers here in this part of Kansas. Do her students know?"

"I don't think so, she said she's never told the class about her background. I know that she grew up in Oklahoma though."

"Okay, the video camera's working. . . .yea. . .okay, we're recording. . . right. . .now."

"Good, let me set up the audio now."

I was nervous as I looked through the little monitor screen on the video camera. In addition to this being the first time I had been in the classroom, this was the first time I had run a video camera in eight years. Dr. Huber assured me that I'd do just fine. She had already uncovered some great data during her previous seven weeks of observations and interviews. It was hoped the video would add perspective and description.

"Now I'll point out Ulysses when he walks in. . .the student is really intriguing. I want to be sure and get some good shots of him on the camera."

"His name is Ulysses?"

"No, that's just the code name I've given him, for confidentiality."

"Okay. . .just let me know when he comes in. . .I hope this comes out all right."

Students began to wander in as I covered the front half of the classroom with the video camera. Students were milling about and getting their things ready for the start of class. At the very front row of the class stood an African American male, James, looking around his desk for something.

"Where's my pens?"

"They're on the floor," stated Billy, an Asian American classmate.

"Yea, they're on the floor," chimed in a good friend of James.

However, James did not seem to either hear or believe him. From the side of the room Billy yelled out to James: *"I didn't knock them on the floor."*

Interestingly, James still refused to look on the floor around him. He wandered over to the desk of his friend Austin and began to mess with the pens there. Austin walked over to his desk and gazed questioningly at James, but James kept on fingering the pens and pencils on Austin's desk. The Asian American student once again yelled to James in an irritated voice: *"They're on the floor!"*

Through the black and white screen of the monitor I watched the two converse in low tones, but I couldn't make out what they were saying. I was having a hard enough time trying to get my right eye to focus on the screen while ignoring images coming through my left eye.

"Mareshea!" a female student called out. At the same instant James took a swing at Austin with his fist. The punch connected to Austin's jaw and the students around the two made comments like *"Ooou"* and *"Gawd"*. I think the students around James and Austin thought this was just shadow boxing between friends.

Austin aimed a blow back at James, which caught James on the chest. But James countered by grabbing Austin's arm and proceeded to stagger Austin with powerful punches to his rib cage. James stepped back and the two "friends" separated. It seemed that some of the students around the scuffle now realized this was not "play," and yet the boys in the room laughed and cheered the two on. The girls, however, were concerned and one in particular, Chenoa, made an attempt to stop the scuffle.

"Now quit it!" she yelled.

"Now quit it!" another boy mimicked.

Chenoa, grabbed at James's arm to prevent him from continuing the fight.

"Just get off me bitch!" he yelled while glaring at Austin.

"You ain't going to hit me yet?" he taunted Austin.

Lunging forward, Austin swung and landed a thundering blow on his opponent's chest. James staggered back several steps and then proceeded to go after Austin with a look of rage in his eyes. Again the guys in the class laughed and cheered the two on. In alarm, I looked up from the camera towards Dr. Huber and wondering why the teacher hadn't noticed what was going on.

Meanwhile, the two "friends" had taken their battle towards the back of the room, knocking over desks and threatening the video and audio equipment with their actions.

"Scott. Go on. . . break them. . . .now. . .go!" Dr. Huber hurriedly whispered.

"AUSTIN AND JAMES!" Alice Dale yelled out, now noticing the fight.

"Hey you guys" I said when I left the video camera and moved over to break up the two.

"James. . .JAMES. . . .JAMES. . .Stop now!" Mrs. Dale's voice started to rise as she came around from behind her desk at the front of the classroom.

"JAMES!. . .JAMES!. . .JAMES!"

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With these commands, Alice Dale calmly walked back to the scuffle. I got between the two and separated them. James went to the front of the room and turned back to Austin and the crowd of students: *"COME OUTSIDE PUNK!"*

"Way ta go, James!" a boy replied.

"James, come here. . .James, come here!"

James ignored his teacher's command and went to the doorway.

"COME OUTSIDE PUNK!" he yelled back to Austin.

"Yeah, way to go, James!" another student added.

Austin moved up to the front of the classroom in an attempt to have another go at James. Alice Dale followed after the boys with a look of concern on her face. Before Austin reached the front of the room a fellow student held him back. Putting his one arm around Austin's shoulder, he patted the glowering student on the chest with his other hand.

James left the room and stood outside the doorway. I moved back to the video camera and returned to filming. Alice Dale and the entire class crowded around the doorway. Austin kept inside the room and watched as James still taunted him from the hallway.

Austin went out into the hall with Alice Dale and the students began to wander away from the doorway and mill about the classroom.

"There ain't never been anything bad like this in the class before!" exclaimed Chenoa as she went back to her desk. Several male students were acting out the punches thrown during the fight; they were obviously excited by the spectacle they had just witnessed.

"People. . .People. . ." Mrs. Dale spoke in a calm even voice as she re-entered the classroom.

"Now be quiet" Chenoa advised her fellow classmates.

"This is what I want you to do. I want you to get a textbook, and then I want you to take out a sheet of paper and write down what you remember about the story that we read yesterday. . ."

"We didn't finish it!"

"I know we didn't finish it, I just want you to write down the part that you remember. . .I'll be right back."

I was silently amazed. Her voice was calm, as if nothing had ever happened. But after class that day she stated that in eleven years of teaching this was the first fight she ever had. She didn't seem disturbed at all as she left the classroom to go on down to the office. Even more surprising was the fact that the students immediately went to the book shelf to get textbooks.

"Who needs a book?" asked Chenoa as she walked down the row of desks with an arm load of textbooks. While she was doing this Billy continued a blow by blow description of the fight to the student behind him.

"Shsh, be quiet," said Chenoa.

It was amazing. In a few short minutes the classroom transformed from a free-for-all into a quiet, productive classroom, minus any supervision from an instructor. Each student opened up a book and began to review the story.

Shortly afterwards, Alice Dale returned to the classroom and the lesson began. In her calm restrained voice, she continued with the class as if nothing peculiar had occurred.

"David, on page 374 we started reading the story. . . .Remember the story of "The Medicine Bag" was on page 374?" she reminded the whole class as they wrote down what they recalled.

"Everything we know about it?" inquired Chenoa.

"I want you to just, very briefly, in one or two sentences. . .tell me. . . basically what the story is about."

There was the sound of the door opening and Dr. Huber whispered to me: *"That's Ulysses, I wondered why he wasn't in the class. . .now be sure to keep an eye on him and how he participates during the class."*

"Okay. . .(as I zeroed in on him with the video camera). . I got him."

Ulysses was a tall student with mixed African American and Native American heritage. During a previous interview with Dr. Huber, Ulysses stated that he was best friends with both Austin and James. The three were known as the "Three Amigos" in the classroom.

Ulysses handed his admit slip to Alice Dale, grabbed a book and then went to his desk on the far side of the room. Within a few minutes he was actively participating in the discussion and the class resumed its normal atmosphere for the next ten minutes or so.

"MRS. DALE?" the loudspeaker crackled.

"Yes"

"COULD YOU PLEASE ASK MARC ULYSSES TO COME TO THE OFFICE"

"Yes"

I had the camera on Ulysses when the announcement was made over the loudspeaker. Ulysses had a sort of "why would they want me" look on his face. However, without saying a word, he got up and walked out of the room.

"I wonder why they called him out, and did you hear that, they called him Marc, his name is Marcellus and he told me in an interview that's the name he prefers, not Marc." Dr. Huber whispered to me.

A few minutes later, I heard the sound of the door opening again and I moved the video camera around to film who was coming into the room. It was Austin returning for his books which were on the ledge on my side of the room. Austin grabbed his books and turned to leave but then looked around at the class. His face was very solemn and yet angry. He did not say a word as he turned and walked out of the room.

The class went back to its discussion on "The Medicine Bag," but once more there was a knock and as I swung the video camera around, Alice Dale opened the door and talked to the person out in the hall. I gathered it was James coming back for his books. Mrs. Dale went to his desk and got the books and took them to the doorway and gave them to James.

"I wonder if they were suspended."

"I don't know," I whispered back to Dr. Huber.

As I panned the camera back over the students in the classroom, I noticed that Ulysses' book was still open on top of his desk. He did not return to class for the remainder of the period and neither did James or Austin. The "Three Amigos" were out of class and out of a day's education. We found out that the two were suspended for a week because of fighting.

Three empty desks. . . Three lost opportunities.

DISCUSSION

When examining this case vignette, emphasis should not be placed upon the actual altercation in the classroom; rather, emphasis should be placed upon the restoration of a productive atmosphere by the instructor and the students.

Ninety minutes of sustained testing can cause a great deal of stress to middle school students and the scuffle that occurred was most likely the result of that tension rather than any other reason evident to the researchers. It must be emphasized that the two males involved in the altercation were best friends and had no previous history of fighting amongst themselves.

The main focus must now be shifted away from the two male students involved in the fight to the reaction of the teacher and the students to the incident. It is hard to reproduce in print the calm restrained tone of voice which was exhibited by Alice Dale and was so admirably captured on the video tape. She remained in control the entire time and imparted this sense of control and calm to her students.

One might expect that as soon as the instructor left the room the class would dissolve into chaos with students discussing the fight and doing very little of the work assigned to them. This was the expectation of not only the original research team but later also that of the three additional members of the reviewing triangulation team as well, who spent numerous hours examining the video record and its implications. Yet against the research team's expectations, the class quickly distributed the needed textbooks and quietly began work on the assignment.

Several reasons may explain this unexpected reaction: (a) embarrassment over having the fight observed by outsiders, (b) shock over the event itself, and/or (c) the voice and demeanor of the instructor Alice Dale.

Were the students' reactions the result of embarrassment? Student embarrassment from having the fight observed by outsiders is believed by the research team to have had little effect on the students. By the day of the fight the students in the study had been observed and interviewed for nearly two months by Dr. Huber. They were familiar with the project and with Dr. Huber In fact, several students initiated interactions with her in the hallway and between class periods. In addition, the researchers would add, the presence of the video camera and cameraman did not prevent the fight from occurring.

Were the students shocked by the occurrence of the fight? The possibility of shock over the fight causing the students to go into quiet submission also does not hold up under scrutiny. As shown on the video tape record, for several minutes after the actual incident and then after Alice Dale gave instructions, students continued to discuss and act out the altercation. However, at the same time, textbooks were handed out by fellow classmates and as soon as every student had a book the discussion ceased and work began on the assignment.

Were the students responding to the voice and demeanor of the instructor? The actions of the instructor must be instrumental in assessing the students' behavior. While giving instructions, Alice Dale maintained a level, restrained demeanor which reassured the students after the confusion of the fight and set a classroom atmosphere conducive to unsupervised activity.

The Native American heritage of the instructor may well be a possible source of her calm demeanor. During one interview Alice Dale stated "I identify very strongly as being Indian." [pplint.3.14] However, this use of one's cultural heritage need not be a conscious act. A person's beliefs, mores, and behaviors are usually part of one's unconscious worldview and have a direct effect upon our outward, or explicit actions (Garcia, 1991, pp.70-78). Many Native American peoples stress observation, restraint, and respect (Hurtado, 1979, & Doornek, 1990). During an interview nearly two months before the day of the fight, Alice explained:

> I found it to be very much that I like for the students to feel a calmness with me, and I feel, I think that they cannot feel calm with me unless we have mutual trust and respect. [pplint.1.6]

This aspect of Native American culture was exhibited by Alice Dale to successfully restore order in the classroom.

Five students in this class self-identified Native American heritage (see Figure 1 for demographic data). One of these students, Chenoa, tried to stop the fight and was instrumental in getting the class back on task when Alice Dale left the classroom. When later asked about the fight and her response, Chenoa relied:

> I told 'em to stop. . .I tried to grab James before, you know, after Austin hit him, I tried to grab him but then he just like threw my hand, and I didn't want to get, you know into it with him, and so I just left them alone. I grabbed James, though. But then he kinda like, "Huh uh", and started hollering at me and I just let him go. I just said, "Forget it." [pplstintsh.9]

In a follow-up question during this interview, the researcher discussed the atmosphere of the classroom after the fight.

> Question: I was surprised the class was very calm after the fight. When I taught in high school a fight would make everyone hyper and excited. But everyone went right back to work. Did that surprise you?
>
> Chenoa: No, not really. Maybe if there were some more kids in there it would, but not with that, that...the people who's in there. It didn't surprise me now. I kinda, I kinda figured they was gonna go, you know, back to work. But if there was some different kids in here that...belong in school I knew they wouldn't have. They would have been like, "Man, did you see all that and all this," but, you know, it didn't surprise me none with, you know, the people who's in that class. [pplstintsh.10]

The transcription of the incident included above provides further evidence of Chenoa's leadership role in the absence of the teacher. She passed out textbooks to students and then admonished a fellow classmate for reenacting the fight. However, Chenoa was not the only student to show leadership in the classroom, as the video tape visually indicates. Two other female students, also of mixed Native American and African American heritage helped to pass out books to fellow classmates and then proceeded to work on the assignment.

The heritage of the instructor and of a number of the students served to create a positive atmosphere felt by

all the students and served to model productive behavior. When Alice Dale returned to the classroom, she remained calm and restrained. The class picked up on her demeanor and used it to further reinforce their productive behavior for the remainder of the class period. Alice Dale believes that many things go into expressing this calmness:

> I guess it goes back again to presenting an accepting demeanor in the classroom that is readily apparent to my students, and so much of it is through body language, through eye contact, through tone of voice, through the things that you say. [pplint.1.10]

How she develops this demeanor in the classroom is hard even for Alice Dale to explain.

> Gosh, it's just, it's so puzzling because I feel that more, perhaps this year than any other year in my teaching experience, that I'm dealing with not only a. . .the group dynamics are very strong to the point that it is difficult to reach the individual and I feel that I have to have a trust or rapport, or at least give a reassurance to that student that I care about him or her in a personal way, that I care whether they make it. That I'm really interested in them making it, and the atmosphere to me. . . just an atmosphere in a classroom is of tantamount importance. . . and yet it's very, very difficult for me to explain how it is that I create the kind of atmosphere that I like to see in a classroom. To me it is a feeling of mutual trust and respect between the teacher and the student, and yet equally as important is the trust that is developed between the students themselves, and their honoring of one another. [pplint.1.5]

Reviewing the literature on Native American worldview affords an interpretation based on the noninterference model of cognitive development as it has been documented by Tedlock & Tedlock (1975), Scallon & Scallon (1979), and Tafoya (1982).

> Except for the specific cases of teasing that we have mentioned, children are allowed a very wide range of behavior. Only actions that might result in serious physical damage are prevented. Minor damages such as the burns that might develop from touching a stove are usually taken as less serious than interfering in a child's behavior and a child is rarely told not to do something. . .It is necessary for the person in the superordinate position to ignore the behavior of the child in order to avoid an inversion of the relationship. Paying too much attention to the child would be tantamount to taking a spectator role and to placing oneself in a position that is subordinate to the child. . . When the child expects indifference and gets strong intervention instead we can suppose that this intervention is felt to be all the more significant. (Scallon and Scallon, 1979, p.31)

Alice Dale's actions during the fight demonstrated, perhaps unconsciously on her part, the above worldview. She did not interfere with the scuffle until the participants were a threat not only to themselves but to the entire class. At that moment, she switched from calling out the boys' names to commanding the two to stop. When desks began to be knocked over she walked back to stop the two males from fighting. The researcher involved in actually separating the two merely stopped the fight before Alice Dale was in a position to do so.

IMPLICATIONS

The use of quiet authority in stressful situations can have a dramatic effect on student behavior. Students often cue their behavior from persons in positions of authority. If an instructor exhibits panic or distress, the students may become panicked or distressed; likewise, if an instructor exhibits a sense of calmness and assurance, then the students will show the same demeanor. Being culturally responsive to the overall needs of the students is of primary importance. A Native American worldview may provide an instructor with the emotional training necessary to deal with stressful and dangerous situations and their aftermath.

* All names have been changed to ensure confidentiality of participants.

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HIGHWATER MIDDLE SCHOOL

Gender	Ethnic Background	Birthplace	Home Language	Religious Background	Other Characteristics	SES
male	Black/Indian	Wichita, KS (Sedgwick)	English	Catholic	vision impaired	middle
male	Spanish	Pueblo, CO. (Pueblo)	English	Catholic	near sighted	middle
male	WASP	Wichita, KS (Sedgwick)	English	--	--	middle
male	Caucasian	Wichita,KS (Sedgwick)	English	Pentecostal	--	middle
male	Black-Indian	Midwest City, OK (Oklahoma)	English	Catholic	?	low-middle
female	Black	Wichita, KS (Sedgwick)	English	Baptist	--	middle
female	--	Wichita, KS (Sedgwick)	English	Catholic	--	--
female	Afro-American	Dallas, TX	English	Church of Christ	--	middle
female	White American	Wichita, KS (Sedgwick)	English	Non-Denominational Protestant	IEP in first grade; suspected learning disability but no IEP; vision impaired	middle
female	Indian	Sacramento, CA (California)	English	Nazarene	IEP, suspected learning disability but no IEP, physically impaired, try to bring music skills on Bobby more.	low low-middle
female	French Canadian, American Indian	Los Alamos, NM	English	Protestant	--	middle
--	no info					
--	no info					

Note: not all parents or guardians returned survey to research team.

Figure 1. Student characteristics from Parental Questionnaire.